Mortal Coil
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Mortal Coil

by McKay

Summary

The Bloody Baron can't figure out how to terrify a particular someone, and he wants to know why.

Notes

Written in 2002. This is a ghost story in the tradition of "The Canterville Ghost" and "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir", written in response to the Snape Fuh-Q Fest challenge, when I asked for a tricky pairing and drew the Bloody Baron.

It really was most intolerable.

Someone within the walls of Hogwarts whom he couldn't frighten? Inconceivable! He was the Bloody Baron, the most fearsome of all the castle ghosts. Even Peeves was intimidated by him, and the Headmaster treated him with unfailing respect. For someone -- a *child* no less -- to refuse to cower in fear, moreover to blatantly *ignore* him, well, that was not to be borne.

The situation began on the night the child arrived. After the Sorting Ceremony and the banquet in the Great Hall, the prefects had led the first years down to the Slytherin dormitory, and the Baron had decided to welcome them in his own way. His usual method -- materialise slowly into sight in the corridor as the group of already-nervous first years approached -- never failed. He didn't have to resort to amateur theatrics as some of the others did, such as groaning or rattling chains, to induce fear. No, all he had to do was appear and stand there, silvery bloodstains shimmering in the dim torchlight, a forbidding glower on his face. The first years, of course, screamed and scattered, with the prefects bounding after them in a desperate attempt to round them up before they got lost.

All save one.

A thin, black-haired child kept walking to the entrance of the Slytherin dorm, passing directly through the Baron without so much as blinking, and the Baron was so shocked by the effrontery of the lad that he couldn't even muster a blood-curdling wail.

Without the password, the boy couldn't enter, and so he stood and waited by the portal. Disgruntled, but not daunted, the Baron stalked toward the boy, his pale lip curled in a fierce snarl, reaching out as if he intended to wrap his spectral hands around the boy's neck.

The child's gaze went right through the Baron, as if he didn't even see the otherworldly menace advancing on him. The Baron threw the little idiot one last look of pure disgust before disappearing and wondered how such a blind, oblivious child had got itself sorted into Slytherin.

But after centuries of existence as an apparition, the Baron had learned to appreciate novelty, and someone who didn't flee in terror at the mere sight of him, who appeared not to see him at all, certainly qualified as that. In life, the Baron had loved a good challenge; the more difficult his quarry, the sweeter the hunt. In death, his competitive streak had not diminished by much, and he considered the child's stubborn determination not to be frightened a personal affront. He had a reputation to uphold, after all, and if it got out that the Bloody Baron had failed to reduce one small, rather ugly boy to a quivering, spineless heap, he'd never hear the end of it.

Thus he launched his own personal campaign, ignoring his general haunting responsibilities -- unless, of course, he was needed to curtail Peeves' rambunctiousness -- to focus on trying to frighten the young Slytherin.

The Baron appeared at the foot of the boy's bed, his moaning and wailing ghastly enough to put a banshee to shame. The boy's roommates squeaked and dove under their covers, but the boy merely complained of a draft and closed the bed curtains.

The Baron glided over the boy's sleeping form and pressed down on his chest, suffocating him until the boy awoke, coughing and vowing to speak to the head of Slytherin House about the oppressiveness of the air.

The Baron remained invisible, sneaking up behind the boy as he took notes during Transfiguration class and trailing icy fingers up and down the boy's neck in hopes of inducing shivers of fear. The boy idly brushed the Baron's unseen hand away and muttered about needing a haircut.

It was enough, the Baron thought, to make one considering haunting a nice, secluded monastery where the brothers had taken a vow of silence. Thus one would have a reason for not being able to make anyone scream, and there would be no intractable children who refused to acknowledge one's presence.

Finally, when dripping silvery ectoplasmic blood on That Boy's homework failed to produce any greater effect than an idle question about leaks in the roof, The Baron, whose silence was part of his menace, couldn't contain himself any longer.

"You are the most impossible, infuriating child I've ever known!"

"You're not the first to say that."

It took the Baron a moment to realise what had happened, and when he did, he rounded on That Boy, who had spoken so calmly. "So you can see me after all," he said accusingly, and the child lifted his eyes from the parchment, his expression bored.

"Of course I can. I'm not blind."

"Then why have you been ignoring me?" the Baron demanded, growing even more angry now that he knew it wasn't that That Boy couldn't see him, but was indeed deliberately snubbing him.

"Because I refuse to act like a ninny every time you appear, like the rest of this school does."

"Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"Why should I be?"

"Because I embody fear itself!"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

When an appropriately scathing retort failed to spring to mind, the Baron did the only sensible thing he could do: he disappeared and left That Boy alone.

Time passed. Like all ghosts, the Baron was marginally aware of it, but given he had an entire afterlife stretching out before him, time had little meaning. He kept up with the passing seasons, which were marked by festive celebrations in the Great Hall which he attended solely to cast a pall over. The concepts of days and years, however, meant little to him now.

He made no more attempts to frighten That Boy. He knew now it would be a wasted effort, time and energy he could spend on more fruitful pursuits, such as catching up on his running tally of how many people he could cause to faint. He and the Thing In the Dungeon of Glamis Castle had a friendly wager going, and he had gotten behind while letting himself be distracted by That Boy. The Baron had a castle full of students, but the Thing had tourists, who were Muggles to boot and far more susceptible to nasty shocks that led to fainting fits.

That Boy changed, got taller and less ugly, or perhaps he simply grew into his nose, making it look less obviously too big for his face and more regally hawkish. He was still thin, though, and spent most of his time working with potions. Many was the night that the Baron made his rounds in the dungeon only to find That Boy hunched over a bubbling cauldron, his expression one of intense concentration. Often, the Baron watched for a while, sometimes tempted to knock a knife off the worktable, or to hide one of the ingredient bottles just for old time's sake, but he never did it.

Then one night, the Baron went to the cramped dungeon workroom That Boy had been given to conduct his experiments, and it was cold and dark and empty. All the equipment was gone, and a quick search of the Slytherin dorm showed there was no sign of That Boy anywhere. He must have finished his studies and left. The Baron wasn't certain whether to be regretful that he would no longer have the opportunity to find what might frighten That Boy, or to be relieved that his one failure was no longer there to mock him.

Time passed, and the Baron was pleased that his scaring success rate was back up to one hundred percent; no one before or since That Boy had proved so difficult, not even the boldest Gryffindors.

And then one night as the Baron drifted along the empty corridors, he turned a corner -- and saw That Boy.

Older, yes, and gaunt now instead of merely thin, his hair long, unkempt and greasy, a sickly cast to his sallow skin, his cheeks hollow. That Boy's dark eyes were haunted, and the Baron wondered what could have succeeded in putting that look in those stubborn eyes, when he had failed so miserably.

At the Baron's appearance, That Boy jerked his head up, a light of apprehension in his eyes, but when he saw the Baron, it faded.

"Oh, it's you," That Boy said, and the Baron noticed the change in his voice. Manhood had given him a smooth, deep voice that the Baron imagined could be quite effective if he used it properly. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here." The Baron drew himself up and replied in his frostiest tone. "What are *you* doing here? I thought you had left."

That Boy spread his hands and laughed mirthlessly. "The prodigal has returned. Are you going to try to frighten me again?"

"Would it do any good?" The Baron heard the note of defeat in his own voice and hated it.

"No."

"Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"Why should I be?"

"Because of what I am!" The Baron lifted his transparent arms as if to display his supernatural form better.

"There are Earthly beings far more frightening than you."

Once more finding himself in the untenable position of having no response handy, the Baron shot That Boy a furious glare and disappeared.

However, his wrath didn't keep him from being curious about why That Boy had returned, and if he would be staying. The rumour mill, however, was remarkably quiet on the subject. He wasn't the only one to have spotted That Boy, whose name he finally learned, roaming the halls intermittently. But while there was plenty of speculation, there were no facts, and the Baron was left to wonder about That Boy's odd comings and goings, most of which occurred in the dead of night. He even took to loitering in the entrance hall on the chance that he might spot That Boy slipping through the doors, looking pale and haggard, but with the same stubborn gleam in his eyes as always.

Then suddenly everyone was in an uproar over that dark wizard being defeated, the one who had been Tom Riddle and then took to calling himself by some ridiculous anagram in what was an obvious ploy to make himself sound more menacing. Amateurs, the Baron snorted. In his day, evil overlords didn't change their names; they just went out and pillaged a random village to make sure the rest stayed in line.

But the pretentious upstart was gone, and there was much rejoicing among the living and the dead alike at Hogwarts. The Baron even chose to forego his usual mirth-quelling appearance at the victory celebration and hovered near the ceiling, just watching instead. That Boy was not among the revelers, which surprised him.

Indeed, for a time it seemed that That Boy was gone for good, which was, to the Baron's surprise, something of a disappointment. Nights weren't nearly as interesting now that he no longer had his "Spot the Sneak" game to amuse him.

Seasons changed, and rumours of a new Potions Master coming to Hogwarts began flitting around the castle. The Baron listened idly and wondered where That Boy had got off to this time. The answer to that question came with the beginning of the new school year, when he showed up.

Yes, That Boy, back *again*, looking far older than his years, lines of care cutting grooves on either

side of that prodigious nose, dressed all in black, and scowling around the place as if he wanted to compete with the Baron himself for title of Most Scary, or at the least Most Surly.

"What are you doing here?" the Baron demanded, materialising out of thin air in the middle of That Boy's workroom in hopes of startling him enough to ruin whatever vile concoction he was working on.

"I live here." Was that a mocking tone being turned on him? The insolent pup!

"Why have you come back this time?"

"Not that it's any of your concern," That Boy said, turning away from him to focus on chopping up some little wriggling thing to be sacrificed to the potion, "but I happen to be the new Potions Master. I'm also the head of Slytherin House now." He cocked his head at the Baron, lifting one eyebrow. "I expect we'll be seeing quite a lot of each other."

The old question still hung between them, still unanswered to the Baron's satisfaction.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Why should I be?"

"Because of what I represent!"

"There are worse fates than death."

This time, however, the Baron didn't disappear in a fit of pique. He had seen enough both during his life and his afterlife to know the truth of that statement very well. It still seemed as if That Boy were skirting the issue -- if he simply didn't find the Baron frightening, why did he never just come out and *say* so? -- but at least that answer wasn't insulting.

After that, he didn't feel quite so inclined to keep his presence hidden.

Sometimes, just to get attention, he removed things from That Boy's worktable, but it always ended with That Boy snapping, "Put it back, Baron," in his most impatient tone, and the Baron sulkily returning whatever it was that he had taken.

Once, he wrapped his invisible arms around That Boy and whispered in his ear, "Why do you not fear the chill of my embrace?"

"It's always cold in the dungeon," came the pragmatic reply. "I hardly notice a difference."

Sometimes he slipped through the walls and into That Boy's bedroom. The first few times, he was apprehensive, wondering if he would see another form lying in bed next to That Boy, snuggled close, perhaps with an arm draped possessively over him. But night after night, the Baron found a solitary body curled up beneath the covers, and he began to wonder if That Boy simply took care of his needs elsewhere, or if there was something wrong with him that prevented him from ever taking a lover to his bed.

One night, the Baron drifted over to the bed and gazed down at the still form and peaceful face. *This*, he thought idly, *is how he will look when he is dead*.

He ran his transparent fingers through the spill of black hair on the pillow. If he concentrated, he experienced a faint sensation almost like touch; it was the most spirits could interact with the living, but it let him feel the silken wash of hair twined around his fingers again.

It let him feel enough to keep him returning -- until the night he walked in, expecting to find That Boy asleep and alone as usual, only he wasn't. The Baron didn't stay long enough to register who was with him. The sight of That Boy's face suffused with pleasure, the gleam of candlelight on his bare skin, the clean lines of his exposed throat as he threw his head back -- all these were enough to make the Baron flee the dungeon and refuse to return. He avoided it so thoroughly that Sir Nicholas started making jokes about how one of the other ghosts would need to be assigned to Slytherin, as it seemed the Baron had retired. Only Peeves using the Baron's absence from the dungeon to his advantage and causing mischief brought the Baron back to his former favorite haunt.

He began patrolling the area again, assiduously avoiding any room associated with That Boy, ignoring the little urge he felt when he saw the workroom door standing open and the telltale whiff of acrid fumes filled the air in the corridor just outside.

That Boy, however, seemed to have as strong an aversion to being ignored as the Baron did. A short time after the Baron began including the dungeon in his nightly prowling again, he was interrupted.

"You've been avoiding me." That Boy stepped out of the shadows and into the Baron's path -- as if it would do any good. The Baron could, if he wished, keep walking right through That Boy and ignore him. It would, he thought, be a nice bit of symmetry, but he didn't do it. "Why?"

The Baron regarded That Boy with cold, unflinching dignity. "I have been busy."

"You've never been too busy to pester me before."

"My afterlife does not revolve around you."

"Since when?" That Boy shot back.

"We both have other duties to attend to," the Baron replied evasively. "We should get on with them."

"Your duties," That Boy said as coldly as the Baron had spoken a moment before, "include haunting the Slytherin dormitory, and you have been remiss in that duty for several weeks. The students are quite disappointed."

"Fine!" he spat. "I'll give them such a hair-raising fright, they won't sleep a wink for the rest of the night. Will that satisfy?"

"It will do for a start." That Boy turned away, his tone dismissive. "I expect to see you down here regularly from now on."

The Baron went away, seething. How dare that insolent mortal tell him what to do? He was the Bloody Baron! He answered to no one, dead or alive, and he would not be spoken to in that way!

He unleashed Peeves on That Boy's bedroom, and remained conveniently out of sight and hearing when people began searching for him to help get Peeves back under control.

That, it seemed, settled the matter. The Baron was assiduous about haunting Slytherin House, and That Boy no longer spoke to him in such a rude tone. Tom Riddle rose and fell again, and That Boy was involved somehow, although the Baron wasn't quite clear on the details. The world outside of Hogwarts mattered little to him, and he didn't bother to ask for clear reports.

In truth, the world outside the dungeon was starting to matter little to him.

Oh, he made public appearances at school events in the Great Hall, and he continued to make rounds of the entire castle, but his thoughts were turned more and more often to the dungeon, or, more specifically, to the person who haunted it just as much as he did. He began visiting That Boy's workshop again, remaining invisible until one night when That Boy informed him irritably that he could feel the Baron staring, so could he please simply materialise instead of skulking behind the convenient veil of invisibility?

He had, that night and every night following. Sometimes, That Boy stopped working to talk to him, and their conversations lasted late into the night. He had even, eventually, ventured back to That Boy's bedroom to watch over him while he slept and sometimes to touch his hair or his cheek, but nothing more.

And so it went. The seasons passed, students came and went, and That Boy grew older and earned a reputation for being nearly as frightening as the Baron himself. The Fat Friar had, upon one occasion, told him that the students were convinced the Baron was somehow in league with That Boy, both of them forming an unholy team all the better to enact their reign of terror over anyone who ventured within their domain. He mentioned the theory to That Boy, earning a rare bark of laughter in response.

"We do work well together," That Boy said, holding out his teacup so the Baron could experience the essence of the tea before he drank it.

"We do indeed." The Baron paused, considering his next remark carefully. "But is it wise?"

A puzzled frown marred That Boy's brow. "What do you mean?"

"You're one of the living. You should spend more time with your own kind."

That Boy let out a derisive snort. "Don't be ridiculous," he said.

That was clearly meant to signal the end of the discussion, and the Baron allowed it, out of selfishness rather than deference. Possessiveness had been what got him killed in the first place, and old habits died hard, so to speak.

The Baron was elsewhere when the inevitable happened. If he'd known it was imminent, he would have been there, but That Boy had been cranky, insisting that he was fine despite the difficulty with breathing and the pain in his left arm he'd had all day, and that the Baron should go discipline Peeves as he'd been asked to do. When he returned, it was too late.

He left the room as the living began making preparations for the shell. It was over. The Baron was alone again.

He glided down the corridor to That Boy's workroom. Everything was as That Boy had left it, the shelves stuffed full of potions texts and innumerable jars and bottles of salves, liquids, herbs, and arcane ingredients that the Baron couldn't identify. The cauldron still sat in its usual place, all the knives, ladles, and other equipment laid out neatly, everything in order. Soon it would all be cleared away, and he had no idea where it would go or what would happen to it. Such was the way of things among the living.

"Missing me already?" A familiar voice drifted out of thin air, followed by the sudden appearance of a shimmering silvery figure.

That Boy. Returned to Hogwarts one final time. The Baron would never be rid of him now, and he had no complaints at all.

A brush of lips, ectoplasm to ectoplasm, made the Baron shiver for the first time in centuries.

"Why weren't you afraid of me?" he asked, gathering That Boy in his arms. He really would have to remember to start using his name; he couldn't very well call him "That Boy" for the rest of eternity.

"You know why."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

-end-

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